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THE CULTURAL POSITION OF THE PLAINS OJIBWAY

By ALANSON SKINNER

AS a whole the Ojibway Indians are a strictly forest-dwelling people, possessing all the various traits of woodland culture.

Along their western border, however, the lure of the buffalo herds, and later the persuasions of the traders, induced many of the tribesmen well out on the plains. Here a number may still be found, principally on reservations in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and North Dakota. They are generally called Saulteaux, but some bands, at least, denominate themselves as "Bûngi" and consider themselves as distinct from the Ojibway by reason of long separation. Whether or not the Bûngi form a separate group from the Saulteaux is not yet certain, but the name is relatively an old one, and there is some evidence that a difference exists. The data here presented were gathered principally from the Bûngi of Manitoba during the summer of 1913.

During the sojourn of these Indians on the prairies the original culture of the Bûngi has been somewhat modified, and in order to ascertain to what extent changes have taken place, we will pass over in a concise review the main features of the culture of the two areas involved, the Plains and the Woodlands.

In a paper read before the Congress of Americanists at Quebec in 1906, Dr Wissler¹ noted the principal characteristics of the first group as follows:

1.—The almost complete dependence upon the flesh of the buffalo for food: the curing of this flesh and afterwards pounding it fine and storing it in bags known as *parflèches*.

2.—The almost exclusive use of a tent, made of buffalo skins stretched around a conical frame-work of poles. This tent is generally known as a *tipi*. In formal gatherings, these tents are arranged in a large circle known in ethnological literature as the "camp circle."

¹ Diffusion of Culture in the Plains of North America, *Congrès International des Américanistes*, XV Session, tome II, p. 39, Québec, 1906.

3.—The use of the dog travois for the transportation of tents and personal property and later the adaptation of the same instrument to the horse. The only water transportation typical of this area was by raft or the bullboat, used exclusively for ferrying.

4.—The almost entire absence of weaving, either of cloth or of basketry, and the very limited use of pottery. The chief industry of the women was work in skins.

5.—The use of the circular shield made of buffalo skin, the elaborate spreading head dress of eagle feathers, and the decorated shirt, usually fringed with hair, characterized their military life.

6.—The ceremonial organization and religious life was characterized by the Sun Dance, the worship of the Buffalo, the medicine-bundle and military societies having a progressive relation to one another.

7.—The decorative art, confined almost exclusively to painting upon raw hide and embroidery in quills or beads, is peculiar in the use of few rectangular and triangular designs, for the composition of complex figures.

In a similar manner the main points of Forest culture may be noted, taking for our purpose the Central Algonkin, and noting that nearly all the features to be mentioned are found among some group of the Ojibway proper.

1.—Hunting and agriculture almost of equal importance in gaining sustenance. Buffalo of no consequence as food, since they were too far away. Wild rice an important commodity. Trunk-like parflèches different in type from the flat folding form found among some of the tribes of the plains. Birch-bark baskets and woven bags generally used as receptacles.

2.—Round dome-shaped wigwams made of bark or bullrush mats in summer, square bark houses in winter. Conical bark tents to the north. Camp circle unknown.

3.—Bark and dugout canoes used for transportation; neither the travois nor bullboat found.

4.—Sashes, bags, and quillwork woven; to the north, rabbit-skin blankets and garments. Pottery good and abundant. Industries of the women varied.

5.—Roach, or fur fillet headdress. Women's garments in two pieces. To the north the Ojibway women wore a gown with separate sleeves. Soft-soled moccasins.

6.—Military life characterized by the use of war bundles. No graded military societies, but those who had achieved war honors, either men or women, became members of a warrior class for life.

7.—Religion was characterized by a complex pantheon. No Sun dance; the Midéwiwin, or Medicine Lodge Society, and the Wabano and Jesako cults important. Picture writing on birch-bark and wood connected with religion.

8.—Decorative art more inclined to conventionalized flower forms.

9.—Scaffold burial unusual; the dead were mostly interred. Ceremony at grave when warriors count coups, that the spirit of the deceased may be properly attended on the journey to the hereafter.

Now let us examine the Bûngi. Knowing their supposed origin and antecedents we must expect that they originally formed a unit of Forest culture, now exchanged for or intermingled with that of the Plains.

In the case of the first group of cultural traits we find the Bûngi formerly almost completely dependent on the buffalo; they harvested wild rice very little if at all, and they practised agriculture. On the other hand, we must not be misled by the last fact, for there are Indians yet living who claim to remember the introduction of maize from one of the village tribes of the Missouri. Both the box and the flat folding type of *parflèches* were used, and likewise woven bags of the typical Central form.

In the case of the second set of traits we find the Bûngi used the buffalo-hide tipi almost exclusively, but that the conical bark wigwam was still retained occasionally. The camp circle was always used when any band was assembled.

Now the travois is one of the most typical means of transportation among the Plains tribes, and it has been shown that the canoe, either dugout or of bark, is typical of the forest peoples. The Bûngi possess the travois (not only the dog but the horse contrivance), and the dugout canoe as well. They do not use the bullboat, although they have seen such craft on the Missouri.

While the art of weaving was absent from the Plains, the Bûngi

for a long time retained it, though it is obsolescent today. Bags of bark twine, reed mats, and rabbit-skin garments were all made, and a few examples are yet to be seen. Pottery they claim to have had, but evidence as to whether they made it themselves, or not, has not yet been gathered.

The round bull-hide shields of the Plains were made and abundantly used, and while no data could be found relative to the use of the elaborate Plains warbonnet, the roach and the fur fillet were found. The women's dress was of the Northern Central type—a gown with detachable sleeves. Soft-soled moccasins were commonly worn, but those with hard soles were by no means unknown.

The two religious ceremonies, which seem to have been nearly equal in importance, were the Sun dance and the Midéwiwin. The cult of the Jesako, though not of the Wabano, was found. The Bûngi possess the regular complex Central Algonkin pantheon.

Their military life lacked the progressive age-societies of the Plains, but had the permanent warrior system of the Forest, by which a man, a woman, or a child performing a brave deed, automatically became a warrior for life. The soldiers' lodge was erected in every band or tribal camp, and there the qualified braves resided with the chief. Apparently war and other medicine bundles were unknown.

In their decorative art the Bûngi thoroughly mix the flower designs of the Forest with the geometric figures of the Plains. They practised picture-writing on birch-bark which characterizes the Woodlands, and once used painted buffalo-robos.

While they once employed the scaffold burial, according to tradition, they now inter their dead. They erect a lodge over the grave for the accommodation of the ghost, and perform all the typical funeral rites of the Central Algonkin area.

Their folklore, so far as recorded, is almost entirely that of the Forests, but a few Plains elements occur.

One feature, shared only with the Plains Cree and the Assiniboine, with whom the Bûngi were always associated, is a clown ceremony. This is gotten up by a man who has dreamed the rite.

A tent is erected in the camp circle for the exclusive use of the clowns. They exorcise demons from the sick, dress grotesquely, wear masks, use inverted speech, beg tobacco at dances, have a ceremonial hunt of a ridiculous sort, and perform many ludicrous rites and antics. There is more than a possibility that the Bûngi derived this custom from a group of Iroquois domiciled near them on Red river as early as 1790. Mr Arthur C. Parker informs me that nearly all these features are duplicated in certain Iroquois ceremonies.

While other facts could be adduced to show the commingling of Plains and Forest culture among the Bûngi, the summary here given is sufficient to prove the point. To conclude, let us say that the Bûngi, traditionally of recent advent into the Plains area, entered the region fully equipped with Woodland culture. Under constant pressure from outside sources, their culture has been influenced at every point, their religion and folklore perhaps suffering the least change, although they have adopted the Sun dance, and some elements of the folklore of the Plains. Thus it will be seen that not only has the strictly rational and material side of their life been affected, but that their religion, social life, and government have also been modified. As they stand today they present a perhaps unparalleled example of mixed culture—almost half and half. Had not their development been arrested by the influx of white settlers and the annihilation of the buffalo, their further progress would have been an interesting problem, the solution of which is probably to be traced by successive steps through the Plains Cree and the Blackfoot.

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